

Ten years on, turnaround in Australia-India ties

Australia-India bilateral relations have a whiff of spring about them as the two countries strive to take the relationship to a 'new level' 10 years after the frosty snapping of defence ties in the wake of the 1998 Pokhran nuclear test.

The Australian Labour government wants to make the India relationship a priority, adding 'depth and vigour' to it. One of the three pillars of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's foreign policy is 'a comprehensive and revitalised engagement with Asia', a far cry from the ousted John Howard-led Conservative government's United States-centric approach.

'We stand today at an exciting juncture in the development of India-Australia relations. There is a shared desire to further expand and upgrade the bilateral relationship,' says an optimistic Sujatha Singh, the Indian high commissioner in Canberra, as both the Australian prime minister and Foreign Minister Stephen Smith have indicated that they will visit India this year.

That the bilateral relationship has so far been lagging is reflected in the fact that the last Indian prime minister to visit Australia was Rajiv Gandhi in 1986. Since then, the nearly 250,000 and growing Indian diaspora is eager to see an Indian prime minister visit Australia.

Pointing out that the broader hopes and expectations in the India-Australia relationship have remained unfulfilled, department of foreign affairs and trade secretary Michael L'Estrange says, 'The growth and influence of India will be a defining feature of the 21st century. We've only touched the tip of an iceberg in this bilateral relationship.'

India has become the third largest source of international immigrants and second largest source of skilled migrants and international students. Against 50,000 Aussies travelling to India in 2003, the number shot up to 106,000 in 2006 and showed an increase of 18 percent in 2007.

Australia and India have also agreed on the terms of reference for the FTA feasibility study, which is expected to be completed by early 2009. Bilateral trade between the two countries is worth A\$11.4 billion (US\$ 10.7 billion).

Australia is using a fresh strategic approach to get New Delhi's attention. From an FTA to backing India's bid to become a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, the government doesn't want to miss the bus as the emerging economic power takes long strides.

'Australia-India relations have a great potential to grow, not just economically but in every field. Through the UN, Australia will have further closer linkages with India. The relations with the three big countries of the US, China and India are more important to us (Australia) than to them and Australia needs to attract their attention,' says Richard Woolcott, former secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and former ambassador to the United Nations.

As energy and resources become the drivers of the India-Australia relationship, with India importing billions of dollars worth of gold and coal, apart from diamonds and food items, the question is what stand Australia will take on the connected problems of nuclear non-proliferation and use of nuclear energy to cut greenhouse gas emissions.

While it was the former Howard government that had unrelentingly condemned the 1998 blasts, it agreed last August to sell uranium to India subject to the finalisation of a US-India nuclear technology exchange deal and the conclusion of a bilateral Australia-India nuclear safeguards agreement.

However, the Labour government has reiterated its pre-election pledge that it will not sell uranium to India unless the latter signs the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

'This government will also have its conversion to understanding the rise of India. Australia holds the world's largest uranium reserves, and a uranium supply relationship would be the most direct way to make it an indispensable partner to a rising India,' says Rory Medcalf, programme director, international security, Lowy Institute for International Policy, an independent think tank based here.

'The relations are hesitating on the brink of partnership and the sale of uranium could be one way of leap-frogging this relationship to a new high. Canberra would be short sighted in the extreme to treat Asia's second rising giant as second rate,' adds Medcalf.

Smith's recent public repudiation of the quadrilateral dialogue between the US, Australia, Japan and India, alongside his Chinese counterpart, didn't go down well in New Delhi. China was irked last year at Japan's move to expand the strategic dialogue to include India. There are many in [New Delhi](#) who are wary of the Mandarin-speaking prime minister's China tilt.

In the past year, the failed terrorism case and incarceration of Indian doctor Mohammed Haneef and issues of race spilling on and off the cricket field have challenged this relationship.

'Despite the good intentions on both sides, Indo-Aussie ties have become a case of one step forward, two backwards,' says Ashutosh Misra, research fellow at Griffith University in Brisbane.

So will this bilateral relationship be catapulted to a new high? As India defines its role as a superpower in the region and the world, there certainly is a sense of excitement and moderate optimism. Much will depend on the two governments' political will to clinch the many opportunities and make this a substantial relationship.

Neena Bhandari (© IANS / India eNews)